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ABSTRACT

The study described here was conducted to examine the impact of reforms made to an elementary education program which include broadened supervised practicums experience for all education methods courses thereby creating a link between theory and practice. Specific attention was given to prospective teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of their teacher preparation program before and after the student teaching experience. Upon completion of required professional coursework and practicums, and prior to and following student teaching, participants (N=41) were asked to complete a questionnaire (copy appended) developed to elicit information with respect to: beliefs about one's ability to teach elementary education subjects; use of various teaching strategies learned in methods courses; and the impact of college coursework in learning to teach. Additional open-ended questions attempted to glean information with respect to perceived areas of strength, concern, and connectedness. Results indicated that teacher candidates with extensive practicums experience begin teaching with confidence and grow in confidence as a result of student teaching; methods courses are valued equally with practicums; and general education and introductory education courses were rated as having the least impact on learning to become teachers. (LL)

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You gotta believe: Teachers' perceptions about their teacher preparation

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In 1969 Tug McGraw, a pitcher for the New York Mets, motivated his team to win its final games of the season and eventually the World Series by repeatedly yelling to his teammates that, "You gotta believe!" The New York press used McGraw's refrain as headline news and attributed "You gotta believe" as the spark that ignited the team to win its first championship. Individuals, like McGraw, with strong beliefs and points of view are more likely to take assertive action than those with weak and poorly developed ones. Teachers are also influenced by their beliefs. What teachers believe about teaching and learning strongly influences what they do in their classrooms (Clark & Peterson, 1986).

Prospective teachers beliefs about teaching and learning to teach are well established in the research literature. More often than not, prospective teachers view caring about children as the most important characteristic of good teaching (Brooseau & Freeman, 1988; Weinstein, 1990). They also believe that their practica and field experiences in classrooms have far more impact on their learning to teach than their college coursework (Feiman-Nemser, 1985; Goodlad, 1990a; Richardson-Koehler, 1988). Before student teaching, prospective teachers typically hold overly inflated

beliefs about their own ability to teach and how they can improve children's learning (Hoy & Wolfolk, 1990; Weinstein, 1988). However, as they acquire classroom experience, they change in their beliefs; their sense of efficacy declines, and they move characteristically toward conservative views about classroom management and control (Hoy & Wolfolk, 1990).

Although the student teaching component of teacher education is recognized as having tremendous impact on prospective teachers' views about classroom teaching, all that they learn is not constructive (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Goodlad, 1990b). Student teachers may learn utilitarian or short-term goals, such as classroom order and control, but neglect long-range concerns about curricular improvement or children's learning (Richardson-Koehler, 1988). At its extreme, the student teaching experience can discourage beginning teachers from continuing in their educational career (Weiner, 1990). It can crush innovative ideas in teaching and force prospective teachers to become more teacher-directed in their approach to instruction and management (Cochran-Smith, 1991).

The 1980's witnessed a wealth of ideas and proposals to reform the education of teachers. Some of these recommendations have already been implemented and can be

seen in increased certification requirements, requiring more depth in the liberal arts and sciences for new teachers (The Carnegie Commission, 1986; The Holmes Group, 1986), and more generally more demanding studies so that they are intellectually strong and reflective thinkers (Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

In this paper we describe reforms made to an elementary education program at an independent college for women. We examine how its prospective teachers perceive the impact of their education and training upon their ability to successfully student teach. This paper differs from other studies because it is conducted within the context of teacher education reform. It elicits responses from prospective teachers about their beliefs pertaining to the importance of their general education in the arts and sciences, their academic majors, professional coursework, and practica. Specifically, this study answers two questions:

(1) How do prospective teachers perceive the usefulness of their teacher preparation before student teaching?

(2) In what ways do prospective teachers change in their perceptions about teacher preparation after they have student taught?

Method

Description of the Elementary Education Program

We conducted this study at Russell Sage College, a small liberal arts college for women in upstate New York. Every education student also majors in a liberal arts area, typically psychology, Spanish, or history. The prospective teachers complete 29 credits in professional coursework, 14 credits in student teaching and an accompanying seminar. They also complete at least 33 credits in their chosen liberal arts field; this coursework is spread rather evenly across their college years. Concomitantly, every student fulfills general education requirements which are designed to develop their knowledge, skills, and values about the past and future world. These combined requirements and programmatic demands are intended to prepare prospective teachers who are broadly educated and intellectually capable.

Four years ago we revised the elementary education program to include increasingly broadened practica experience for all education courses. We envisioned observing and participating in a variety of situations wherein their classroom responsibilities increased as they became more knowledgeable about teaching methods and strategies and more comfortable in their role as

prospective teachers. Every education course, with the exception of a junior year reading and language arts course where they analyze videos of classroom teaching, require a practica experience. For instance, in the first three education courses, students observe and participate in at least 80 hours of unsupervised practica. In January of their junior year, students participate in a supervised experience of 125 hours teaching language arts in small and large groups. In the spring semester of their junior year they spend Thursdays and Fridays teaching in the same classrooms with the goal of their learning to become comfortable teaching entire classes.

These supervised practica are closely tied to methods courses. Simply stated, there is a direct attempt to link theory and practice. Prior to student teaching itself, every student teacher will have completed 250 hours of supervised practica. Additionally, conscious decisions are made to place students in a variety of classroom situations in an effort to ensure that they are experienced in self-contained, combination and/or team teaching in a variety of settings (urban, rural, and suburban) with differing models of educational practice (whole language, basal, modified). Teachers who served as role models in

students' junior year also become cooperating teachers in the senior year of other education students. Thus the cooperating teachers have a long term and established relationship with the college program and supervisors.

Subjects

Forty-one undergraduate student teachers voluntarily participated in this study. They were all female and primarily the first members of their families to attend college.

Data Collection

A 31 item questionnaire requiring students to rank their responses on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 7, was developed (Appendix A). The first ten items on the questionnaire elicited student teachers' beliefs about their ability to teach elementary education subjects. The second group of items, 11-24, elicited their perceptions about their ability to use various methods and teaching strategies learned in the methods courses. The last cluster of items, 25-31, elicited their beliefs about the impact of their college coursework in learning to become a teacher, particularly their general education courses, academic major, and methods and practica. Additionally, we posed ten open ended questions in an attempt to tease out areas of strength, concern, and connectedness that the Likert items might

have obscured (e.g., "I feel most confident when teaching...; My greatest concerns about student teaching are...").

We piloted the questionnaire during the preceding spring semester with our junior methods students. As a result of this pilot, we revised many of the items and added the open-ended questions.

Procedure

In the fall of the senior year, and after finishing required professional coursework and practica, all the student teachers completed the questionnaires. We administered the first questionnaire prior to student teaching, again after their first seven week placement, and finally after their second placement.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the questionnaire data in several ways. First we prepared descriptive statistics in the form of frequency ratings for all questionnaire items. We then used non-parametric statistics on the first and third questionnaires to determine if the observed changes in students' responses before and after student teaching actually represented meaningful differences in their beliefs. Due to the ordinal, or ranked, nature of the data, it was deemed that the traditional parametric statistical measures that depend on normally distributed

interval level data (such as t-test, analysis of variance) were inappropriate. Their non-parametric equivalents, Mann-Whitney U as opposed to t-test, Kruskal-Wallace Analysis of Variance as opposed to ANOVA, and Spearman's Order Coefficienct as opposed to Pearson's R, were used instead. Because three of the students did not complete the last questionnaire, thirty-eight (N=38) complete sets of questionnaires, representing student teachers beliefs before and after their student teaching, were used in our analysis.

Results

We examined student teachers' responses to questionnaire items to answer these two research questions: (1) How do prospective teachers perceive the usefulness of their teacher preparation before student teaching? (2) In what ways do prospective teachers change in their perceptions after student teaching?

Frequency ratings of each of the questionnaire items indicate that before student teaching prospective teachers perceived themselves quite confidently in their ability to teach the elementary subjects. Table I illustrates students' perceptions pertaining to questionnaire items 1 -10. This table displays the percent of student responses at 5 or higher on the 7-point Likert scale of the questionnaire. The data

clearly indicate that the student teachers felt confident before student teaching and grew markedly in their confidence after completing their student teaching placements.

Insert Table 1 about here

A similar high degree of confidence is found in students' perceptions about their general preparation to teach and their ability to use specific classroom methods and strategies (questionnaire items 11 - 24). Table 2 displays the percent of student teacher responses at 5 or higher on the 7-point Likert scale before and after student teaching. This table illustrates that they grew in their confidence for every item after they student taught.

Insert Table 2 about here

Student teachers' perceptions, both before and after student teaching, about specific elements of their teacher education are displayed in Table 3. Table 3 depicts the percent of students scoring in the upper range, a 5 or higher, on the 7-point Likert scale of the questionnaire. The data indicate that students rated

their professional courses, methods, and practica more highly than they did their general education, academic major, and introductory courses in education. The same response pattern is maintained after student teaching, because the student teachers again perceived their methods and practica to have the strongest influence on their learning to become a teacher. The student teachers perceived their general education, academic major, and Foundations of Education course as having far less impact on learning to teach.

Insert Table 3 about here

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine if the changes in student teachers' rankings to the questionnaire items, before and after their student teaching, were meaningfully different. Table 4 identifies the levels of significance for the first ten questionnaire items that pertain to teaching specific subjects areas.

Insert Table 4 about here

Probability levels at or below the .04 p level suggest there is a genuine difference in student teachers'

perceptions before and after student teaching for 8 of these 10 questionnaire items. Although the students didn't change in their beliefs about teaching reading or art, there are simple reasons for this: (1) 100% of the students rated their ability to teach reading in the upper level of the Likert scale before student teaching, and after their second placement, 97% of the students indicated their beliefs about teaching the same way. Consequently, there was no significant change in their beliefs because they were extremely confident on this item at the onset of this study. (2) The students in this study never took an art methods course, and that is why they responded with a lack of confidence on this item; although there was a percentage change in the number of students rating this item more highly after student teaching, the change was not meaningful statistically.

Probability levels at .04 or below suggest that there is also a significant difference in student teachers' perceptions about their general preparation to teach, methods and pedagogy. The results of the Mann Whitney U indicate meaningful differences, before and after student, for items 11 through 24 on the questionnaire.

Insert Table 5 about here

Table 6 indicates that there are no meaningful changes after student teaching in the students' perceptions about the impact of the various elements of their teacher education upon their wanting to teach (items 11 to 31). Specifically, the prospective teachers remain constant in their responses to the questionnaire items about their academic major, general education, and Foundations in Education course. Although the student teachers didn't change in their beliefs about the impact of their educational psychology course, methods, supervised and unsupervised practica, their first responses to these items were already high, so any later changes on these items would not be statistically significant.

Insert Table 6 about here

Results of this data analysis indicate that the student teachers in this study began quite confidently in their beliefs about their education, training and ability to teach. Furthermore, their confidence grew as they student taught. After they completed two student

teaching placements they felt even more positively about their ability to teach elementary subjects, use specific teaching methods and strategies. However, students rated their general education, coursework in their major, and introductory education course (Foundations of Education) as having the least impact in their learning to become teachers.

Discussion

The findings of our study shed some light on the effects of reform to an elementary teacher education program. We learned that prospective teachers not only begin teaching confidently but also grow in their confidence as a result of student teaching. Although other studies suggest that student teachers often begin teaching with overly inflated perceptions about their abilities, this was not a finding from our study. Most importantly, particularly from our perspective as teacher educators, the student teachers in this study valued their methods coursework equally, if not more, than their many practica experiences in elementary classrooms.

We also learned that the student teachers in our study did not value their general education or studies in their academic major as highly as their professional studies. We wonder, however, if these perceptions are skewed by the immediate need to manage and teach a full

classroom of children. We suspect that novice teachers may change in these perceptions after they acquire more classroom experience. As new teachers become comfortable with children and grow in their understanding of elementary school curriculum and pedagogy, their perceptions about their teacher education may change. Issues that new teachers now so deliberately and consciously consider, may eventually become tacit knowledge. Conversely, their world knowledge which they now view as having little impact in learning to become teachers many later emerge as having great influence on their success and satisfaction as classroom teachers.

Why did the teachers in our study differ in their perceptions about their ability to teach from those in other studies? Our thoughts are speculative at this point, but the extensive practica experiences required in this elementary education program may contribute to our student teachers confidence to teach. After all, the students in this study acquired over 330 hours of practica experience in elementary classrooms before actually student teaching. Viewed in this light, it is no wonder that they begin their teaching careers believing so strongly about their abilities to teach.

Of course we find the results of this study encouraging. From our perspective as teacher educators,

we want our new teachers to believe in themselves and value the pedagogy learned in their professional studies. It's not sufficient that new teachers simply learn from experience or rely on their childhood memories about teachers to guide them in their own classroom instruction. We want new teachers to have broad world knowledge and a rich understanding about current elementary education teaching practices.

The findings of our study indicate that new teachers can begin their professional careers believing positively and confidently about their abilities to teach. And like the World Series hero, Tug McGraw, what new teachers believe about teaching will have strong influence about they do in their own classrooms.

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Table 1

Frequency Ratings

How do you feel about your ability to teach

Rating Scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no	poor	low	moderate	good	high	very high

Questionnaire item		Before teaching		After teaching	
		Percentage	(N)	Percentage	(N)
1.	Major subject	84%	(28)	89%	(33)
2.	World knowledge	58%	(22)	86%	(32)
3.	Reading	100%	(38)	97%	(37)
4.	Language arts	95%	(36)	97%	(37)
5.	Integrated L.A.	97%	(36)	100%	(37)
6.	Social Studies	68%	(26)	78%	(29)
7.	Math	68%	(26)	89%	(33)
8.	Science	63%	(24)	81%	(30)
9.	Health	78%	(31)	86%	(32)
10.	Art	42%	(23)	81%	(30)

Note. Table 1 indicates the percentage and number of students rating each questionnaire item 5 or higher on the Likert scale, before and after student teaching.

Table 2

Frequency Ratings

How do you perceive your ability to

Rating Scale

1 none	2 poor	3 low	4 moderate	5 good	6 high	7 very high

Questionnaire item		Before Teaching		After Teaching	
		Percentage	(N)	Percentage	(N)
11.	Teach	89%	(34)	100%	(37)
12.	Manage class	76%	(29)	95%	(35)
13.	Plan	92%	(35)	100%	(37)
14.	Teach whole classes	79%	(30)	97%	(37)
15.	Teach small groups	97%	(37)	100%	(37)
16.	Teach large groups	82%	(31)	100%	(37)
17.	Teach conventional class	76%	(29)	84%	(31)
18.	Teach process	84%	(32)	100	(37)
19.	Use coop. lng.	84%	(32)	97%	(36)
20.	General ability	89%	(34)	97%	(36)
21.	Understand responsibilities	94%	(36)	100%	(37)
22.	Individualize	82%	(31)	92%	(34)
23.	Learning styles	71%	(27)	86%	(32)
24.	Adapt	79%	(30)	89%	(33)

Note. Table 2 indicates the percent and number of students rating each questionnaire item a 5 or higher before and after student teaching.

Table 3

Frequency Ratings

How do you feel about the influences of the various compenents of your education and training for becoming a teacher?

Rating Scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no	poor	low	moderate	good	high	very high

Questionnaire item		Before Teaching		After Teaching	
		Percentage	(N)	Percentage	(N)
25.	Academic Major	78%	(30)	78%	(29)
26.	General Ed	70%	(37)	81%	(30)
27.	Foundations	66%	(26)	80%	(30)
28.	Ed Psych	84%	(32)	80%	(30)
29.	Methods	92%	(35)	89%	(33)
30.	Sup. Practica	82%	(35)	100%	(37)
31.	Unsup. Practica	86%	(33)	92%	(34)

Note. Table 3 indicates the percent and number of students rating each questionnaire item a 5 or higher before and after student teaching.

Table 4

Whitney Analysis of Covariance

How do you feel about your ability to teach

Rating scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no	poor	low	moderate	good	high	very high

Questionnaire item	U score	2-tailed P
1. Major	350	.0014 *
2. World knowledge	446	.0045 *
3. Reading	532	.0535 n.s.
4. Language arts	444	.0034 *
5. Integrated l.a.	462	.0105 *
6. Social studies	509	.0333 *
7. Math	333	.0001 *
8. Science	420	.0021 *
9. Health	464	.0079 *
10. Art	542	.0820 *

* $p < .04$
n.s. = not significant

Table 5

Mann Whitney Analysis of Covariance

How do you percieve your ability to

Rating Scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no	poor	low	moderate	good	high	very high

Questionnaire item		U Score	2-tailed P
11.	General Preparation	338	.0000 *
12.	Manage class	334	.0001 *
13.	Plan instruction	355	.0001 *
14.	Teach whole class	279	.0000 *
15.	Teach small groups	386	.0001 *
16.	Teach large groups	235	.0000 *
17.	Teach conventionally	461	.0080 *
18.	Teach process class	426	.0020 *
19.	Use cooperative lng	396	.0006 *
20.	Ability to function	342	.0000 *
21.	Responsibilities	363	.0001 *
22.	Individualize	419	.0017 *
23.	Learning styles	462	.0084 *
24.	Cognitive development	430	.0027 *

* $p < .04$

Table 6

Mann Whitney Analysis of Covariance

How do yo feel about the influence of the various components of your teacher education and training for becoming a teacher?

Rating Scale

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
no	poor	low	moderate	good	high	very high

Questionniare item	U Score	2-tailed P
25. Major	612	.6805 n.s.
26. General education	559	.1619 n.s.
27. Foundations of Ed	496	.1595 n.s.
28. Ed. Psychology	649	.8499 n.s
29. Methods	680	.9637 n.s.
30. Supervised practica	565	.2115 n.s.
31. Unsupervised practica	532	.1685 n.s.

n.s. = not significant

Appendix

FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE

As you know, we are examining our teacher education program and are interested in learning what you think about your courses and training at Russell Sage. Would you kindly help us by again answering this questionnaire?

You should feel certain that all the information provided on the questionnaire will be kept anonymous. We only ask for an identification code so we can match your responses on today's questionnaire with those you provided before student teaching. For this reason we ask you to provide the last four digits of your Social Security Number.

Final four SS : _____

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!

I am an undergraduate student ____

a graduate student ____

My other major is _____

My current placement is ____ primary K-3

____ intermediate 4-6

My current placement is (check one)

____ conventional basal and textbook based

____ modified basal and textbook based

____ whole language/literature based

Please rate each of the items on the questionnaire according to a one to seven scale, with one being the lowest and seven the highest rating. (1 = have no confidence: 7 = highly confident)

I. How do you feel about your ability to teach

1.	your major subject ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2.	world in general?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3.	reading ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4.	writing & the language arts?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5.	integrated reading/writing?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6.	social studies ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7.	mathematics ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8.	science ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9.	health ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10.	art ?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

II. Please rate the items that follow according to how you perceive your (1 = low 7 = high)

11	general preparation to teach	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12.	ability to manage classrooms	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.	ability to plan instruction	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14.	ability to teach whole classes	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15.	ability to teach small groups (N = 2-5)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16.	ability to teach large groups (N = 6-15)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17.	ability to teach in a conventional classroom	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18.	ability to teach in a process/literature based classroom	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19.	ability to use cooperative learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20.	general ability to function in a classroom	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21.	understanding of professional responsibilities		2	3	4	5	6	7
22.	ability to individualize instruction	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23.	ability to plan for different learning styles	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24.	ability to adapt instruction according children's cognitive/emotional development	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

III. How do you feel about the influences of the various components of your education and training at this college for becoming a teacher

0 = no opportunity 1= no impact 4= moderate impact 7=great impact

25.	coursework in academic major	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26.	Courses in general education	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27.	foundations of ed/ school organization	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28.	Educational psychology /instructional design	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29.	methods courses	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30.	supervised practica	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
31	unsupervised practica	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

IV. Please identify or provide short answers to the following items:

32. My greatest concerns about student teaching are:

33. I feel most confident when teaching

34. I would like more training in the following area(s):

35. The part(s) of my teacher preparation which most helped me learn to become a classroom teacher are:

36. The five best children's books I have read are (why?):

V. Please write the teaching strategy which first comes to mind about the following:

37. How would you begin to teach geography in third grade?

38. What do you what students to remember about any major war in U.S. history?

39. As a generalization, what do you most want children to learn?

40. Given a typical classroom of 25 children, how will you organize/group the children for literacy instruction?

41. What was the most encouraging moment of this student teaching experience?

42. What was the most discouraging moment of this student teaching experience?

43. How has this first student teaching experience influenced your motivation to teach?

44. Which of your lessons in this placement was the most successful? Why?

VI. Having nearly completed your studies at this college, what, if anything, would you change about your teacher education program ?